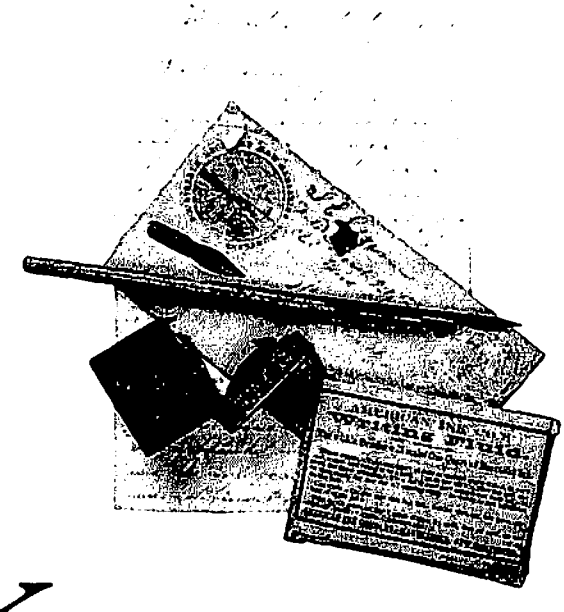


The First Black Battlefield Reporter

Thomas Morris Chester spent his life on the front lines of the fight for racial equality

By Gerald S. Henig

THOMAS MORRIS CHESTER never picked up a gun during the Civil War, but he fought as vigorously for black rights as any soldier who stormed an enemy stronghold. A pathbreaker for his race throughout his life, he faced real danger as an African-American war correspondent serving at the Virginia front. Chester knew full well that if Confederates captured him they might shoot him outright, or even worse, sell him into slavery.

Despite those risks, Chester had readily accepted the offer of the *Philadelphia Press* to cover the Union Army's campaign against the Confederate capital of Richmond during the last months of the war. His decision to put himself in harm's way did not come as a surprise to those who knew him well.

Thomas Morris Chester (in later years he preferred to be referred to as T. Morris) was born in Harrisburg, Pa., on May 11, 1834. He surely inherited some of his bravery and gumption from his mother, Jane, a fugitive slave who escaped from her owners at age 19. She eventually met and married George Chester, who earned a living by selling oysters.

The Chesters had 12 children, six of whom would live to adulthood. They operated a restaurant in the heart of Harrisburg, the state capital, that gained a reputation for serving up good food as well as radical thought. Patrons could buy a steak and also read a copy of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* while they enjoyed their meal.

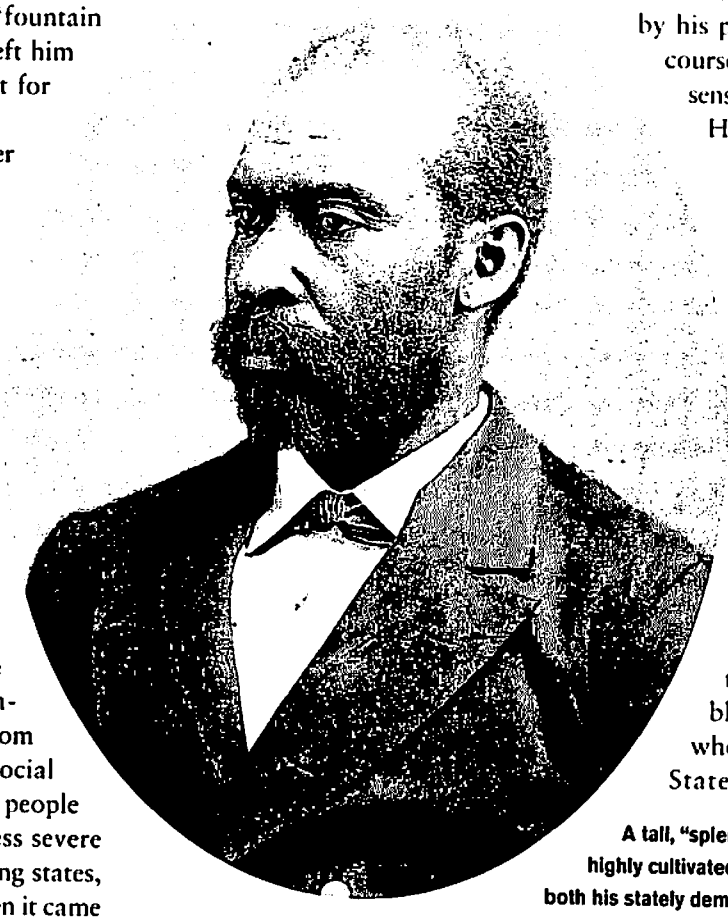
Unlike most free African-American children,

North or South, Thomas had it comparatively easy as a youngster. As successful restaurateurs, his parents had the means to educate their children, enabling 16-year-old Thomas to enter the Allegheny Institute, not far from Pittsburgh. He spent two years at the institute, which had been founded as a school, later a college, "for the education of colored Americans." The time Chester spent at this "fountain of learning," as he put it, left him with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

Throughout his life, Chester would continue to improve his education, earning a law degree in England, for example, when he was 36. For a time, however, his formal schooling in the United States was put on hold as he found himself caught up in the devisive issues that were pitting the Northern and Southern states against each other during the years leading up to the war.

Life for Chester, a free black man in mid-19th-century America, was far from ideal. The economic and social restrictions imposed on free people of color in the North were less severe than those in the slaveholding states, but that was not the case when it came to political rights. In Pennsylvania, Chester's home state, free African Americans were denied the right to cast a ballot.

The federal government's policies were even more unsettling regarding black rights. In 1850 Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, which gave broad powers to U.S. marshals and special commissioners to capture and return runaway slaves. The law prevented African Americans from testifying while providing every advantage to white slave catchers. Even free blacks feared for their safety. After all, what prevented an overzealous federal agent from seizing any black person on the charge of being a runaway, based on trumped-up charges? The accused, having no right to a defense, could then be taken south and and sold into lifetime bondage.



A tall, "splendid looking man, with manners highly cultivated," Chester impressed people with both his stately demeanor and his writing.

Chester must have witnessed firsthand the devastaing impact of this legislation on the African-American community. Not far from where he was attending school in the Pittsburgh area, hundreds of blacks fled and made their way to Canada rather than live in a perpetual state of uneasiness.

The Fugitive Slave Law resulted in great anxiety much closer to Chester's home. Although his own mother had fled slavery some 25 years before, she was still at risk for being hauled back to the South.

All the concern about the Fugitive Slave Act radicalized Chester's thoughts about black life in America. He became convinced that the United States would remain a white man's country and nothing was going to change that. Defiant, self-confident and passionate about his views, Chester refused to submit, as he said, to the "insolent indignities" suffered by his people. There was only one course of action he thought made sense—leaving the United States. His destination: Liberia.

Located on the west-central coast of Africa, Liberia was founded by the American Colonization Society in the early 1820s as a refuge for freed slaves. The first African Americans to settle there, initially in a colony, encountered extreme hostility on the part of the native population, yet somehow survived. But the experiment itself never really got off the ground. Pre-Civil War blacks, the vast majority of whom were born in the United States, had no intention of migrating if freed from bondage. America, not Africa, was their homeland. The handful of African Americans who had relocated, however, made a go of it, and in 1848 they proclaimed Liberia an independent republic. Great Britain extended diplomatic relations that same year, France four years later.

In late April 1853, 19-year-old Chester took passage for Liberia on the ship *Banshee*. Upon arrival he enrolled in Alexander High School, located in Monrovia, the country's

capital. Hoping to complete his high school education, he was soon disappointed to find that the curriculum was very limited, offering courses that he already taken in one form or another. With no opportunity for advancement, after a year or so Thomas left Liberia and returned to the United States.

Over the next decade, 1854-1864, Chester was in constant motion. Determined to graduate from high school, he attended an academy in Vermont and earned his diploma. Afterward he went back to Liberia, stayed briefly, came home and then sailed twice more to Africa. On his first return trip to Liberia he served as a teacher of newly arrived immigrants; the second time he established a newspaper in Monrovia; and on his third trip he got involved in Liberian politics, but his candidate lost.

Thomas returned to the United States in 1861, while the country was engulfed in the Civil War. Yet for African Americans, nothing seemed to have changed. President Lincoln had made it clear at the outset that his administration would not interfere with slavery; its objective was solely to preserve the Union. Convinced more than ever before that black colonization was the only solution to racial injustice in America, Chester spoke at a number of meetings to persuade free African Americans to migrate to Liberia.

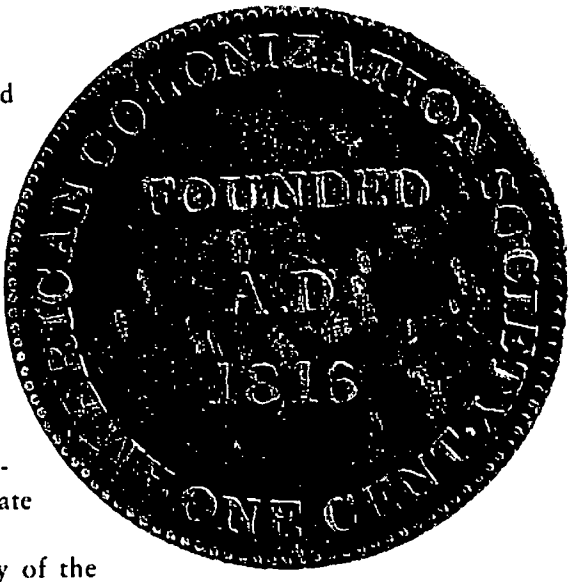
Before the Emancipation Proclamation, Chester fervently tried to persuade free blacks to migrate to Liberia. He had little success

Although he was a highly effective speaker and was physically impressive on the podium—a tall, muscular, "splendid looking man, with manners highly cultivated"—his audiences remained unreceptive. Most black Americans were still opposed to colonization, had no desire to migrate and firmly believed that the United States was their country too.

Once President Lincoln announced his Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the colonization movement, never popular to begin with, lost whatever momentum it still had. The administration had reversed itself; this was going to be a war not only to preserve the Union but to liberate those in bondage.

Not one to speak highly of the leadership in Washington, Chester had to concede that the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation was truly a momentous event. It was, as he put it, "more glorious in its consequences than any since Plymouth Rock became the corner stone of American liberty."

On February 20, 1863, in a speech to a capacity audience at Cooper Institute in New York City, the hall where only three years before Lincoln had delivered a campaign address that helped win him the nomination, Chester warned his mostly black listeners that their enemies would say and do whatever necessary to bring discredit upon the proclamation. "You will hear," he predicted, "in more frightful phrases than ever, that the Negroes are coming north to take the bread out of the white man's mouth... and that black men will be satisfied with nothing else but white wives.... We have neither preached nor practiced amalgamation," Chester reminded his audience. Ironically, he pointed out, "Those very persons who preach so loudly against amalgamation have been practicing it from their



In 1821 the American Colonization Society established the Republic of Liberia for freed slaves. The republic began minting currency, such as this copper one-cent piece, in 1833.

earliest recollections"—a reference to the mixed-race children found on numerous plantations.

But this was not a time to "ridicule" and "chastise," Chester went on, this was an occasion for "rejoicing and exultation." With uncharacteristic optimism, he declared, "The dark days of the republic are ended, and on the indestructible foundations of virtue, justice, and liberty, the future prosperity and splendor of this nation will be erected." To "enthusiastic applause," Chester concluded his speech by praising "the wise and just administration of Father Abraham."

The proclamation also included a call for the enlistment of black soldiers. Here was an opportunity for African Americans to achieve some sense of equality, even if it meant risking their lives. Along with other prominent black leaders, Chester took part in the drive to recruit men of color for the Union Army. He himself was made a captain in the Pennsylvania State Militia when his hometown, Harrisburg, was threatened by a Confederate attack. But once the emergency passed, his appointment was withdrawn. Even in matters of soldiering, it became clear that despite the expectations raised by the Emancipation Proclamation,

blacks were to be kept in an inferior position. Only a minuscule number of African Americans were appointed as officers on a permanent basis. And as for those serving in the ranks, there was no question that they were considered (and in many cases treated) second-rate compared to white soldiers. Sometimes abused by their white officers, supplied with substandard weapons and equipment, denied adequate medical care, provided with insufficient rations and even paid less than white soldiers until Congress, prodded by Lincoln, rectified the matter in mid-June 1864, black soldiers often found themselves in sorry situations.

Not surprisingly, when Chester was offered the opportunity by the *Philadelphia Press* in August 1864 to serve as a reporter on the front lines, focusing especially on black troops, he took the assignment immediately. He was the first African American to serve as a war correspondent for a major daily newspaper, but whether he realized it or not is impossible to determine. Whether he considered the danger involved is also unknown. What was probably uppermost in his mind was the chance to tell a large white audience the truth about black men in combat. And he wasn't about to let that opportunity slip by.

Assigned to the front lines, Chester spent most of his time with the Army of the James, which had large numbers of black troops, fighting near the cities of Petersburg and the Confederate capital, Richmond. His numerous dispatches covered in detail the clashes between both armies, the extraordinary bravery of the Union soldiers, white and black, and the names of the men killed and wounded.

As for those who had expressed concerns about the abilities of African Americans on the battlefield, Chester made it clear their reservations were not justified. In combat "the colored soldiers had done handsomely. There was neither wavering nor straggling." They stood their ground and presented "a fearless front to the enemy."

"It would not be extravagant to predict that they will yet accomplish more brilliant achievements," Chester told his readers. Yet much depended upon how black soldiers were treated by their white officers. There were those in command of African-American troops who refused to treat "a negro patriot as a man." But if shown respect and kindness, Chester emphasized, "they will follow wherever their superiors may lead."

In another set of reports, Chester made his readers aware of the grave danger black combatants faced if they fell into the hands of the Rebels. "Between the negroes and the enemy it is a war to the death" the reporter maintained. He had spoken to numerous and reliable witnesses, and there

For those who doubted the abilities of African Americans on the battlefield, Chester made it clear their concerns were unjustified

Despite his hatred for slavery, Chester could show empathy for enemy soldiers in his dispatches from the front. He penned the following in February 1865:

Unwavering Rebels

THE CORNFIELD on the Boulware plantation still attracts the hungry Confederates to gather what they can to appease their appetites. It is the easiest thing possible to capture these foraging parties, but as coming there for subsistence furnishes splendid opportunities to desert, the Johnnies are permitted to use their discretion. Many of them come into our lines, while others return to their camps. Day before yesterday, while the division officer of the day, Major Wm. H. Hart, was visiting his picket line, he saw three rebs in the cornfield, which is between the lines of both armies. He rode up to them, and extended a pressing invitation for them to advance to our picket line. This they at first declined, alleging that they feared the colored sentinels would shoot them—an opinion very generally entertained, since the Fort Pillow massacre, among the rebel soldiers whenever they come in contact with colored troops. Major Hart, naturally very persuasive, assured them that they should not be injured, and they accompanied him to the picket reserves, where he gave them the opportunity of electing for themselves whether they would come into our lines or return to their own. They acknowledged that the Southern army was unanimous in its desire for peace, and that it would hail the day with great rejoicing when they should return to the Union. They, themselves, were anxious to come back, but did not wish to desert, but would cheerfully give in their adhesion when the Southern people yielded. While these half clothed "gray-backs" were shivering over the picket fire, eating the hard corn from the ears, the comfortably-clad negro reserves were partaking of fresh beef and soft wheat bread, with a nonchalance that indicated plenty and contentment. They were then permitted, on their own choice, to return to their rebellious camps, where the magnanimity of Major Hart...and the disposition of our colored troops to receive them on deserting, were, no doubt, duly discussed.

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Major William H. Hart

was no question that the Confederates "slaughtered" wounded and surrendering black soldiers. In one of the charges launched against Petersburg, for example, Chester reported that a Rebel officer killed five wounded soldiers of color by placing the muzzle of his pistol to each of their heads and shooting them point-blank.

At least these incidents of "racial barbarity" would soon come to an end. On April 3, 1865, Richmond surrendered. This was the high point of Chester's journalistic career, as he accompanied the triumphant Union Army—with a black regiment serving as one of its lead units—into the fallen capital. The reporter made his way to the Virginia State House where the Confederate Congress had met, entered a room formerly occupied by its House of Representatives, and sat at the speaker's desk to start writing his dispatch. Chester must have relished the moment. Here was a black man seated in the legislative chamber of the Confederacy, a nation that had defended slavery and racial inequality to the last.

As Chester began writing, a paroled Confederate officer passed the doorway and noticed the reporter was seated in the speaker's chair. "Come out of there, you black cuss," the Rebel shouted. Chester refused to acknowledge him and kept on writing, prompting the Southerner to yell once again, "Get out of there or I'll knock your brains out." Still ignored, the Confederate rushed up to Chester, intending to pull him from the chair. Chester stood up and punched the officer so hard that it sent him sprawling on the floor.

Just then a Union captain appeared, and the Southerner recovered enough to ask him for his sword so that he could cut the black reporter's heart out. "I can't let you have my sword for any such purpose," replied the Northern officer, but he added, "If you want to fight, I will clear a space here, and see that you have fair play." After taking a closer look at the size of Chester, the Yankee captain turned to the Rebel and added: "Let me tell you that you will get a tremendous thrashing."

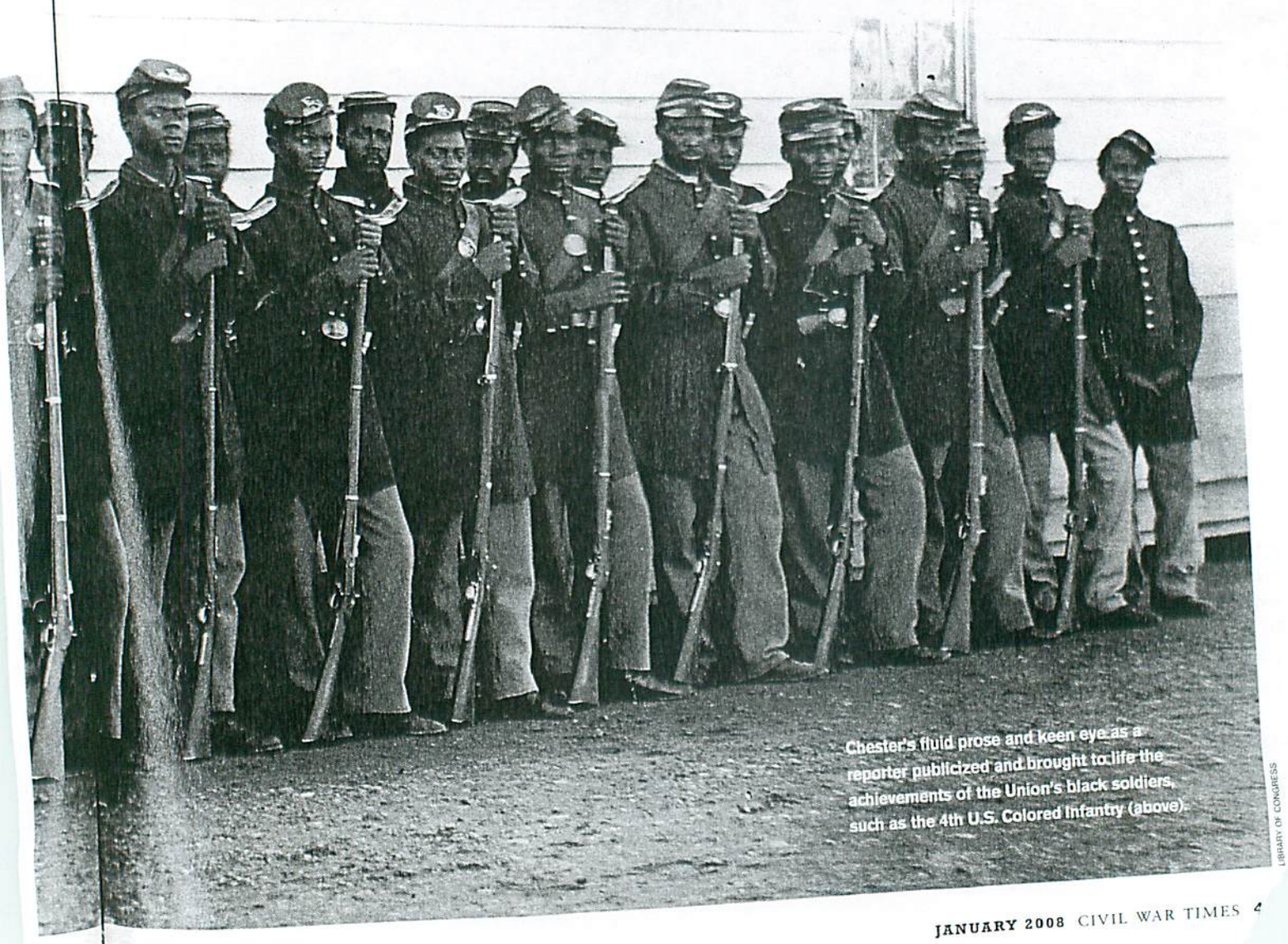
Humiliated and now frightened, the Confederate stormed off, and Chester went back to finishing his dispatch.

After the war came to an end, Chester became disenchanted with the racist policies of Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson. The former reporter sailed to England, where he studied law, earned his degree and served for two years in Europe as a diplomatic representative of Liberia. When that country's leadership, whom he supported, failed to win reelection, Chester vacated the post.

Returning to the United States, he got involved in the postwar reconstruction of Louisiana, where in his capacity as an attorney (he was the first African American to practice law in that state) Chester vigorously defended equal rights for blacks. For a brief period he also served as a brigadier general of the Louisiana State Militia. But neither his legal nor his military efforts proved fruitful. The federal government was far more interested in advancing the interests of big business, and white racists resumed control of Louisiana.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s Chester briefly held two minor federal positions. He ended his career as head of a railroad construction company that, lacking adequate funds and suffering from stiff competition, went out of business within a year. On September 30, 1892, at age 58, Thomas Morris Chester died, deeply disappointed that America was a country still steeped in racial injustice.

The people of Harrisburg have not forgotten their hometown hero. On October 13, 2004, Riverside Elementary School in the Harrisburg School District was renamed the Thomas Morris Chester School. Speaking at the dedication ceremony, Harrisburg's Mayor Stephen R. Reed noted that Chester was "one of the founders of America's civil rights movement, and today his legacy of accomplishment and contribution is forever memorialized at a location where this city's, state's, and nation's future leaders and citizens will be taught." CWT



Chester's fluid prose and keen eye as a reporter publicized and brought to life the achievements of the Union's black soldiers, such as the 4th U.S. Colored Infantry (above).

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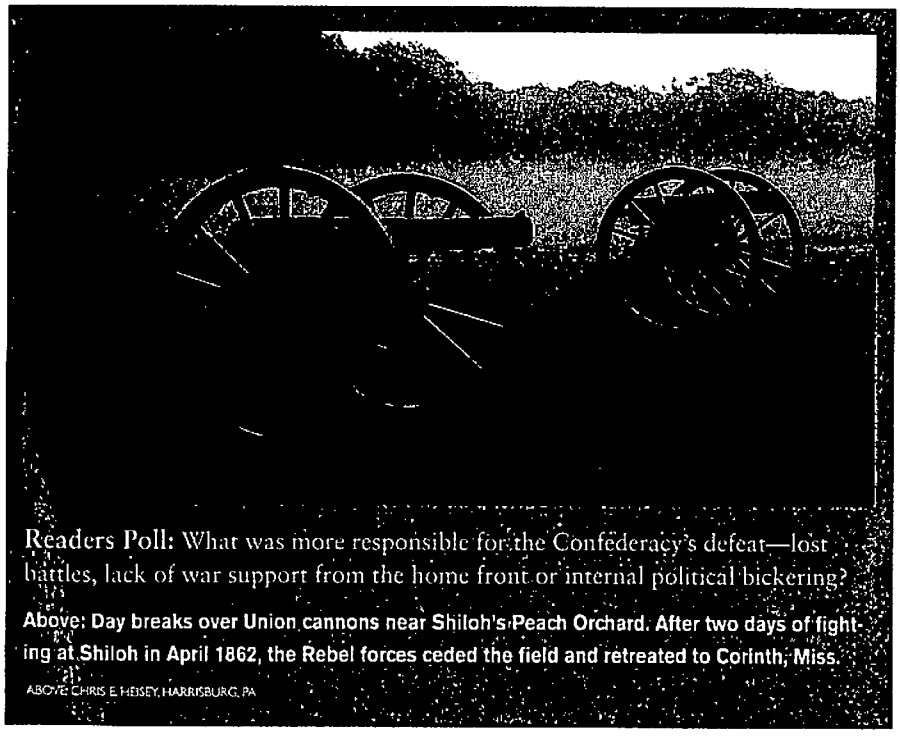

Readers Poll: What was more responsible for the Confederacy's defeat—lost battles, lack of war support from the home front or internal political bickering?

Above: Day breaks over Union cannons near Shiloh's Peach Orchard. After two days of fighting at Shiloh in April 1862, the Rebel forces ceded the field and retreated to Corinth, Miss.

ABOVE: CHRIS E. HEISEY, HARRISBURG, PA

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